THE HINDU
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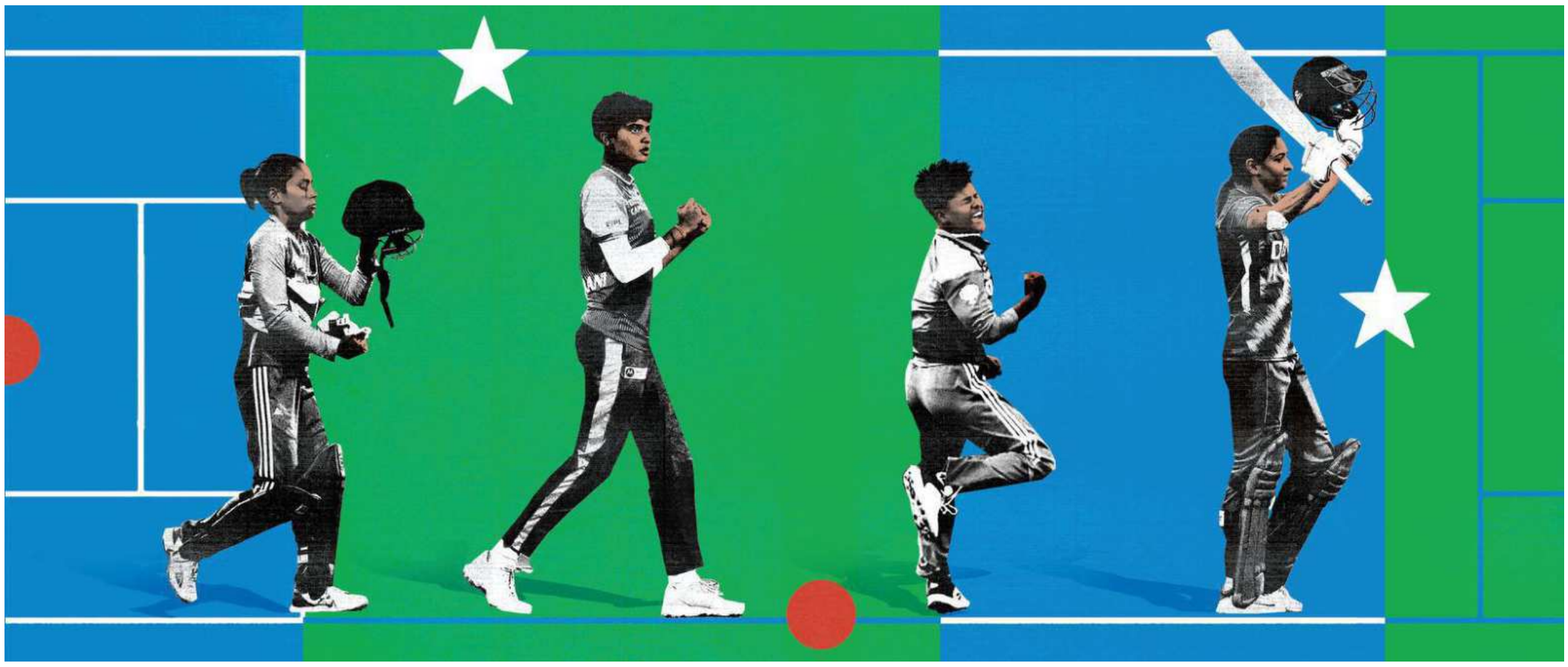
22 YARDS OF HER OWN

Ahead of the ICC World Cup which begins on September 30, a look at how women from small towns are rewriting India's cricket narrative, inspiring a cultural shift, greater visibility and heftier paychecks

ILLUSTRATION: HITESH SONAR



Suprita Das

On July 20, 2017, Harmanpreet Kaur played what was, arguably, the most important innings by an Indian woman cricketer. Her audacious 171 runs off 115 balls against heavyweights Australia in the semi-final of the ICC Women's ODI World Cup became the knock that made Indian audiences begin to see "women's cricket" as what it truly is: cricket.

Almost 5,000 miles away from Derby, England, where Kaur was dismantling the defending champions' bowling attack, 15-year-old Uma Chetry found her purpose. In her local club in Assam's Golaghat district, Chetry got goosebumps just hearing the score. Between juggling school, farming duties with her parents, and cricket practice, she would watch the highlights on repeat. She declared to her teammates, "One day, I want to bat like that. One day, I want to play with Harmanpreet Kaur." Seven years later, on July 7, 2024, Chetry became the first woman cricketer from the Northeast to make her India debut. The blue cap was handed to her by captain Kaur herself.

Like Chetry, Kranti Goud's story too is about raw talent bursting through in cricket's less celebrated geographies. Back in 2017, in Ghuwara village near Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh, 14-year-old Goud was leading her district team to the final of a U-19 tournament. Local coach Rajiv Bilthare was struck by her "speed that can only be God's gift". That spark matured into an impressive spell, with six wickets in just her fourth international match, handing India a rare 'away' series win against England this July.

Cricket was far from an option for N. Shree Charani from Andhra Pradesh's Kadapa district, best known for its temples and *karam dosa*. According to her father Chandrasekhar Reddy, a junior worker at a thermal power plant, cricket being a team sport, his daughter, good at athletics, kho kho, volleyball, would not get "noticed". Except, destiny had other plans for the teenager who just wanted to "play, play, play".

We were emptying our family's pockets to play for India. We used to organise everything on our own, tour after tour, purely because of our passion for the game

MITHALI RAJ
Former India captain

At this year's Women's Premier League (WPL), Shree Charani, 21, took four wickets in just two games for the Delhi Capitals. That was enough for India coach Amol Muzumdar to hail her as the "find of the tournament". Within months, she was fast-tracked into international cricket. With 10 wickets in India's T20 series win over England – where she was named Player of the Series – it will be safe to say Shree Charani's father had to eat his words, and happily so.

Chetry, Goud and Shree Charani are more than just newcomers in India colours; they carry small-town dreams to the grandest stage of them all – the ICC Women's ODI World Cup, which kicks off on September 30. More than half of India's 15-member squad will be making their World Cup debut. They are signposts of a larger cultural shift: cricket breaking out of its metropolitan mould even further, families and communities recalibrating their ideas of what their daughters are capable of, and young women from India's Tier 2 and 3 towns dreaming big.

Period of growth

No one understands this better than former India captain Jhulan Goswami, whose own journey from Chakdah to Kolkata in the late 90s – two hours each way by train just to get to a ground – is as legendary as her wickets tally. "We are a nation undergoing transformation, and today you will see women in arenas that were unseen and unheard of, say 10 years ago," she says. "The population is young, and every girl wants to do something worthwhile with her life. Cricket is just another medium. The sport has always been popular, and invokes so much pride. Now, finally, it has started giving financial security to the girls."

Goswami and her long-time teammate and partner-in-record-breaking, Mithali Raj, have lived through the full-circle of the story of women's cricket in India. They started their careers before the women's game came under the ambit of the Board of Cricket Control in India (BCCI), and the players were almost always broke. "We were emptying our family's pockets to play for India," recalls Raj, the highest run-scorer (across formats) in women's international cricket. "We used to organise everything on our own, tour after tour, purely because of our passion for the game."

When the Raj-led team returned from South Africa as World Cup runners-up in 2005, it was in anonymity, just like much of their careers had been until then. Days later, each player received a cheque for a paltry ₹9,000 from team sponsor Sahara. In sharp contrast, when the Indian men's team returned as runners-up in 2003, they were handed plush apartments in Sahara's Amby Valley in Pune, in addition to cheques from multiple sources.

The 2017 World Cup, where all matches were televised live, and India finished runners-up, marks the clear dividing line between the 'before' and 'after' eras of Indian women's cricket. The International Cricket Council's digital and social media platforms garnered a record 100 million views, doubling the coverage that the women's game was badly in need of. "Not once were we made to feel like we lost the final," Raj says, of the time they returned from England.

The league [WPL] has prepared this current lot for international cricket. They are ready to give it their all and are not afraid to express themselves. It doesn't matter if they fail, but the spirit and energy is something else and that rubs off on the whole team

JEMIMAH RODRIGUES
India batter

The population is young, and every girl wants to do something worthwhile with their lives. Cricket is just another medium. The sport has always been popular, and invokes so much pride. Now, finally, it has started giving financial security to the girls

JHULAN GOSWAMI
Former India captain

Until then, she and Goswami had spent their lives bringing laurels to the nation, all in obscurity. "I had never been so busy and in so much demand ever in my life," says Goswami, of the countless interviews, studio visits, events, shoots and public appearances in the months that followed. The next few years, capped by another runners-up finish in the 2020 T20 World Cup, were marked by unprecedented growth.

Breaking generational patterns

But it was really the WPL in 2023 that changed the grammar of opportunity for women's cricket in India. Institutionally, it has been the most significant change, especially in a system where domestic players still wait for formal contracts. And for the first time, the women in blue were being valued. Batter Smriti Mandhana's ₹3.4 crore deal with Royal Challengers Bengaluru made headlines, but the ripple effect was felt deeper, as even uncapped domestic players began earning life-changing sums in a single auction.

"After WPL, you can finally say, yes, cricket can be a profession," says Raj. "Earlier, families saw cricket as a gamble, now they see it as a career." In addition to WPL, almost all Indian states now have their own T20 leagues for women, which means more game time, more chances to get noticed by talent scouts, and of course, more money.

But salaries tell only half the story. Beyond finances, the league has given these women something less tangible but more powerful – confidence. They want to be seen, and heard. For the girls from smaller towns, the hurdles have always been bigger – long commutes, fewer facilities, increased social scrutiny.

CONTINUED ON
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Many firsts

- Indian women are eyeing their first-ever World Cup trophy (only the U19 girls have won twice, not the senior team)
- Australia are the defending champions and the most successful team in ODI World Cups — with a record seven wins
- Apart from Australia, only England (4) and New Zealand (1) have won the World Cup
- India (Guwahati, Indore, Vizag, Navi Mumbai) are the hosts, but Sri Lanka (Colombo) too is one of the venues as Pakistan cannot compete on Indian soil. (All Pakistan games will be played in Colombo.)
- This year, for the first time, there will be an all-woman match officials panel (14 umpires and 4 match referees)

Richard Osman (seated) with actors (L-R) Ben Kingsley, Pierce Brosnan, Helen Mirren and Celia Imrie, the star cast of the Netflix adaptation of his book *The Thursday Murder Club*.

IN CONVERSATION

CRIME, COMEDY AND PENSIONERS

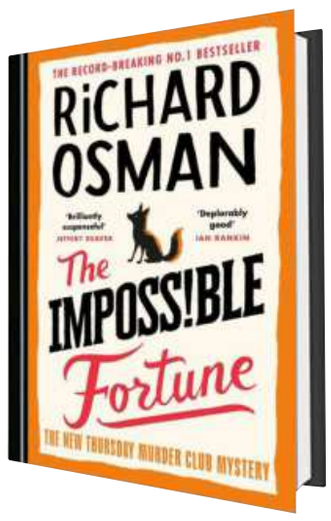
Author Richard Osman on mixing humour with grief and murder with the everyday in his bestselling series *The Thursday Murder Club*

Mini Anthikad Chhibber
mini.chhibber@thehindu.co.in

It's been a good year for Richard Osman's bestselling series *The Thursday Murder Club*. The fifth instalment in the murder mystery *The Impossible Fortune* (published by Penguin Random House) is just out, and a screen adaptation of the first novel began streaming on Netflix last month. Starring Helen Mirren and Pierce Brosnan, the film – which revolves around four pensioners who solve crimes from their swanky retirement home in England – might have worked better as a series, allowing more time to explore the sweet subplots and avoid a rushed resolution. But Osman has no complaints. "I just sat back and enjoyed watching those wonderful actors at work," he says.

Ahead of his new book's release, with Osman "in the middle of signing 10,000 books", we catch up with the author and TV presenter to learn what's in store for *The Thursday Murder Club*. Edited excerpts:

Question: The Impossible Fortune *begins with a wedding and a best man in trouble. What drew you to this setting?*
Answer: I wanted something to get Elizabeth out of Cooper's Chase. She's had a year of grief. A wedding would be something where she would get back in the saddle. I wanted the book to start with somebody sitting next to Elizabeth on a bench and telling her that somebody was trying to kill him. I love writing Joyce and her daughter Joanna as well. So, I had my first four or five chapters lined up instantly. The second I knew that Joanna was getting married, I knew exactly how the book was going to start.



Q: *How do you keep the voice fresh and funny while still revealing plot and character?*
A: I prefer the laughs coming from the character. I try not to write jokes or a one-liner or punchline. I hope that everything that makes readers laugh comes from the truth of the characters and how they react in certain situations.

Q: *Food is a very powerful emotion in* The Thursday Murder Club. *Do you use food to create a sense of comfort?*
A: No, when people wake up in the morning, even if they're in a great work of literature, they're usually not thinking deep thoughts. They're thinking about what they're going to have for breakfast, or what's on the radio. I like to write about the normality of life. I like extraordinary things to happen in the plot and ordinary things to happen in people's lives. I like to mix up the world of murder and intrigue with the day-to-day.

Q: *How do you strike a balance between comedy, grief and murder?*
A: Striking a balance between comedy and grief is easy, because they're two sides of the same coin. In one of the books, Joyce says, "tears are just your pain laughing". For murder, I throw a plot at my characters. For me, everything comes from character. Are these people real? And then what can I throw at them? And the thing that I throw at them is always murder.

Q: *Between books four and five, you gave* The Thursday Murder Club *a year off and introduced Amy and Steve in* We Solve Murders. *What prompted the break?*
A: I wanted to write new stories. *We Solve Murders* has the same sort of humour and British sensibility as *The Thursday Murder Club*, but it is a much more global story, and I was able to do things that *The Thursday Murder Club* wasn't able to do. My next is another *We Solve Murders* book. I love writing about both groups. I'm now in a position where I'm excited to get back to the characters in *We Solve Murders* in the same way that Agatha Christie switched between Miss Marple and Poirot.

Q: *How involved were you with the making of* The Thursday Murder Club*?*
A: Not at all. My job is to write books. I've done my version of *The Thursday Murder Club* story, that came from my heart and my head. I went down to set a couple of times. You've got to go and have a bit of fun. I met Steven Spielberg [producer] when he came down there and chatted with all the actors. It was incredibly exciting. The one thing I didn't do was give notes or opinions, because the last thing anyone wants is the writer leaning over their shoulder.

Chris Columbus [director] would ring up and tell me what was going on. I was very happy to let him get on with it. And, of course, when Helen Mirren, Pierce Brosnan, Ben Kingsley and Celia Imrie are starring, I'm not going to complain! I just sat back and enjoyed watching those wonderful actors at work.

Q: *Do you think seeing these iconic actors might shift how readers imagine the characters?*
A: The characters are fairly well established for anyone who's read the first four books. Some people will think that Helen is exactly how they saw Elizabeth, or that Celia is exactly how they saw Joyce. Fans of the books will have an idea of what those characters look like and who they are. For people who come to the books through the film, however, the characters will be these four actors.

ONE FOR THE ROAD

Let's play a game

Experimenting with form and genre, these page-turners invite readers to join in on the fun

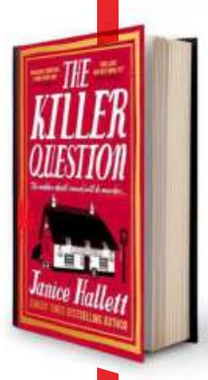
Swati Daftuar

If last month's stack was shadowed and gothic, this one is restless: full of games, tricks, and stories that test their own boundaries. A house that records its own secrets, a café where time pools strangely, an office break room turned into a survival stage. Murder, manners, folklore, even true crime – each book is playing with form, while daring the reader to play along.

Strange Houses | Uketsu, trs Jim Rion

Uketsu has a knack to make the uncanny feel meticulous – floor plans sketched like case notes, and diagrams you linger over as if the walls might start whispering. He's built a cult following in Japan by writing behind a papier-mâché mask and using visual horror as a part of his storytelling. That sensibility carries over here. The story coils slowly: a freelance writer called in to examine a "dead space" in a Tokyo home uncovers layers of family rot. It's the kind of horror that stares back at you.

(Pushkin; ₹699)



The Killer Question | Janice Hallett

Hallett loves to hand her readers scraps of communication and dares them to solve the crime themselves. Here, it's WhatsApp messages, emails, transcripts, and group chats, all orbiting a village pub quiz. A new team arrives, sweeps every round, and then a body turns up nearby – with ties to a long-buried kidnapping case. Hallett, once a magazine editor and screenwriter, turns chatter into theatre; the quiz banter is funny, the twists brutal, and the clues buried in plain sight.

(Hachette India, ₹799)

Desi Crime | Aishwarya Singh, Aryaan Misra

From the Burari mass suicide to the T-Series mob assassination and the Delhi "tandoor murder", alongside cases of cults, cannibalism, and family betrayals, this book features 20 true-crime stories from across South Asia. It maintains the conspiratorial tone and sharp intimacy that made Singh and Misra's *Desi Crime Podcast* a hit: you notice the forensic precision, the empathy under the narration, and the way the writers stitch together interviews and archival material. It's like a whispered conversation in the dark, except every page is drawn from fact.

(Pan Macmillan India; ₹350)

Break Room | Miye Lee, trs Sandy Joosun Lee

This novella feels like sitting in on a reality show... except the set is your office and the prize is survival. Lee, who once worked in engineering, constructs the narrative with brisk pacing and sharp dialogue. The fun is in how ordinary office habits – coffee runs, side-glances, "team spirit" – turn monstrous under fluorescent lights. You laugh even as you squirm in your seat.

(Hachette India; ₹599)

Days at the Torunka Café | Satoshi Yagisawa, trs Eric Ozawa

This one feels like drifting through memory while sipping coffee. Author Yagisawa, who won the Chiyoda Literature Prize for his debut book *Days at the Morisaki Bookshop*, probes the quiet ordinariness that suddenly tips into the profound. Torunka Café doesn't grant miracles; it simply gives space for memory to unfold, which might be its own kind of magic.

(HarperCollins India; ₹399)

(A new column on popular fiction for the month.)

The writer is an independent journalist, editor, and literary curator.

Correction

In the August 31, 2025 edition of this column, Harini Nagendra's book *Into the Leopard's Den*, the latest in her 'Bangalore Detectives Club Mystery' series, is set in the forests of Coorg, and not as mentioned. The error is regretted.

— Editor

Kiran Desai back on Booker Prize shortlist

The 2006 Booker winner's new novel is among six 'brilliantly written and brilliantly human' books in contention for the £50,000 prize

Team Magazine

Inter-generational family saga, sharp humour, poignant love story, state-of-the-nation novel, this book has it all," said the Booker Prize 2025 judges about Kiran Desai's new novel, *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*, which finds itself on this year's shortlist for the £50,000 prize (approx. ₹60 lakh).

Delhi-born Desai, 53, who won the Booker Prize in 2006 for her last novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, is joined by previous nominees, the Hungarian-British writer David Szalay, with his coming-of-age novel *Flesh*, and British writer Andrew Miller, with his tenth novel, *The Land in Winter*, set during the 1963 Big Freeze in the United Kingdom.

The other half of the shortlist comprises American authors Katie Kitamura (*Audition*), Ben Markovits (*The Rest of Our Lives*) and Susan Choi (*Flashlight*), rounding off a selection that judging panel chair Roddy Doyle, winner of the 1993 Booker Prize, described as "brilliantly written and brilliantly human".

Actor Sarah Jessica Parker, who is also on the panel of judges this year, described the judging process as akin to "being a part of probably the best book club a reader could ever imagine". "After reading these many books with this quality of people... We've had such an extraordinarily intense and fulfilling reader experience," said the Emmy Award-winning actor who launched her own literary imprint, SJP Lit, in 2023.

This year's Booker selection, hailed by pundits as the most diverse list in a while, was chosen from 153 submissions of long-form fiction, written and published in the U.K./Ireland between October 2024 and September 2025.

The six shortlisted authors receive £2,500 each and a specially bound edition of their book. The winner will be announced on November 10 in London.

The shortlisted books; and (below) Kiran Desai.

My favourite places to write are verandahs and kitchens. I remember verandahs where I worked during rainy seasons and hot summers, smacking mosquitoes alongside stray dogs desperately chasing their fleas. When there are no verandahs occupied by stray dogs, such as in my home in New York City, I work in the kitchen... The kettle boils, the lettuce is washed, the words proceed

KIRAN DESAI
Author, *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*

(Courtesy: thebookerprizes.com)

Imperfect postures

How Indian or Hindu is yoga? A new book presents another origin story

Sanjukta Sharma

As of 2025, the elite pursuit of longevity-forward wellness demands one compelling cornerstone: Sensory-rich, tactile practices and experiences rooted in the physical world, which foster belonging with communities. Everything analogue and offline are a wellness zeitgeist. Think about that morning hour on the yoga mat. I couldn't imagine life without my yoga classes.

But what if the origins of modern yoga, by which I mean yoga practised around the world for, say, the past 50 years, were based on fabricated histories and lineages, and fascist, white supremacy? British author, artist-activist and yoga practitioner Stewart Home in his new book *Fascist Yoga: Grifters, Occultists, White Supremacists and the New Order in Wellness*, presents a new origin story of yoga, and it's neither holy nor Hindu. Yoga is one of India's best exports to the world – one of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's, and in extension, the Hindu Right's pet appropriations as a political, social and diplomatic weapon.

Mini portraits

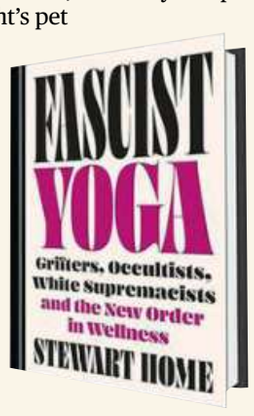
Home says yoga belongs to many. It even has a mongrel quality in his book, which unfolds through a series of highly entertaining mini portraits. Grifters, occultists, white supremacists, Hitler-worshippers and hippies took what originated in ancient India, doctored it to suit their own desires and needs, sprinkled some fairy dust to gym and circus exercises and sold it to unsuspecting masses. He begins with a Californian escapologist Pierre Bernard and ends with Frank Rudolph Young, an author of several books on yoga, who peddled a pseudo-scientific version of yoga in the mid-19th century across America and Europe. Through portraits and oeuvres of these so-called messiah yogis, Home concludes that what we think of as yoga today is, rather, "modern postural practice".

The word 'yoga' doesn't abundantly figure in the book. The discipline has changed so many hands, assimilating, eliminating and rebirthing yogic postures and techniques – "a perfect synthesis of a science and an art," as yoga guru B.K.S. Iyengar told me when I met him for an interview in 2013 – that Home's book challenges the monolithic idea of yoga being a pure textual discipline introduced to the world by Maharishi Patanjali who's considered the father of yoga in this part of the world. "All drew ostentatiously, although often superficially, on Eastern spiritual beliefs, which they then proceeded to blend with Western esoteric thought and practices."

Home traces the Far Right connections of "modern postural practice" to British ultranationalist thinkers like Francis Yeats-Brown who believed that yoga and Hindu-origin spiritual systems such as tantra were Aryan in nature, which aligned with the premise on which the Hindu caste system was built – a means to preserve racial purity. "They shared this position with Nazi racial theorists," Home writes. He traces assimilative grain of yoga to what was described in the first modern book on yoga called *Hatha Yoga* (1904) under the pen name Ramacharaka: A hodgepodge of Patanjali's postures, Scandinavian primitive gymnastics and Western physical culture.

Hybrid practice

The natty, riveting parts of the book are the people and their apocryphal, con-artistry backstories. But, given Home's immersion in texts and knowledge around yoga, his message in the book, perhaps unintentionally, is uniquely universalist: For a wellness and spiritual practice that has stood the test of time over centuries and having its uniquely populist moment because of prime spots on Instagram algorithms, yoga as we know it today is best given the status of a trans-continental hybrid practice. "Since modern postural practice is so clearly a product of cultural hybridity, Newcombe [Suzanne Newcombe, author of *Yoga in Britain: Stretching Spirituality and Educating Yogis*] could just as well have written that it is only by considering yoga as having developed across multiple geographical locations that statements about its significance and effects can have any meaning," he writes.



Fascist Yoga: Grifters, Occultists, White Supremacists and the New Order in Wellness
Stewart Home
Navayana Books
₹450

It's time we acknowledged that despite its origins, yoga is no longer just an Indian practice. Its reach and influence across nations, races and geographies make it, at best, hybrid-Indian. And much like Indian gurus alleged with sexual exploitations, several yogis on the pages of this book used the practice for sexual gratification and exploitation of women – the potential subject of a yoga history tome that Home could perhaps write next.

In 2014, when Modi first addressed the United Nations General Assembly, he arrived with a mission: to propose a resolution that recognises June 21 as the International Day of Yoga and India as the spiritual birthplace of yoga. To a gathering of nearly 200 political leaders, Modi enthusiastically framed yoga as "an invaluable gift of [India's] ancient tradition". He suggested that honouring yoga could help foster world peace, mitigate the consequences of climate change and combat armed violence. The following year, the world celebrated its first yoga day.

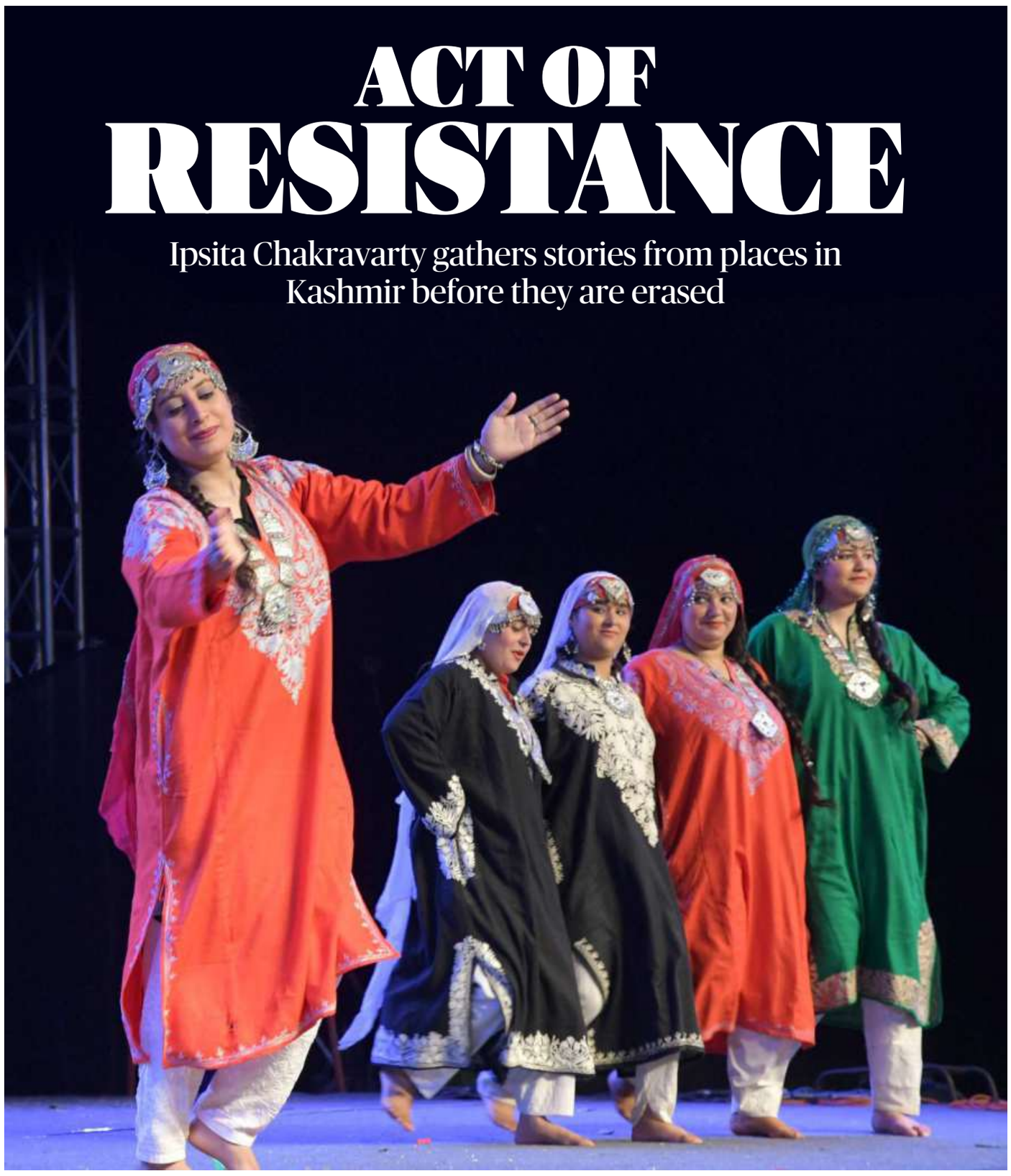
Today, in India, yoga is more than what it is at its highest form – an uplifting practice with transformative benefits for the human body and mind. It is a badge of Indianness – a Hindu Indianness. Home's book comes at an opportune time to puncture that monolithic belief.

The reviewer is a Mumbai-based journalist.

Stewart Home says yoga belongs to many. (GETTY IMAGES)

ACT OF RESISTANCE

Ipsita Chakravarty gathers stories from places in Kashmir before they are erased



Mehak Jamal

It is not even enough to rename government offices and stadiums so that there is no memory of what has been. To reorganise a place, it is necessary to kill its stories. It is necessary to take apart the public sphere that held these stories – walls, parks, marketplaces, news pages, web pages."

Somewhere towards the end of *Dapaan: Tales from Kashmir's Conflict*, author and journalist Ipsita Chakravarty writes these lines. They summarise what has been happening in Kashmir in the recent past and, indeed, for as long as memory serves. The recent ban by the government on 25 book titles on Kashmir should serve as a timely reminder. When the stories of a place are erased, they must remain alive in the memories of its people. It becomes a collective responsibility and an act of "not forgetting". It is in this realm of remembering and retelling that *Dapaan* comes alive.

Plausible deniability

Folk tales in Kashmir often begin with the word *dapaan* – 'it is said'. So do many lived memories of Kashmiris during the enduring conflict, told and retold over years of remembrance and resistance. *Dapaan*. It is said. The word simultaneously invokes a collective undeniability – this, what I am telling you, is the norm; and offers a subtle shield of plausible deniability – though 'it is said', *I* did not say it. This delicate dance between taking responsibility and protecting oneself is something many Kashmiris perform on the daily.

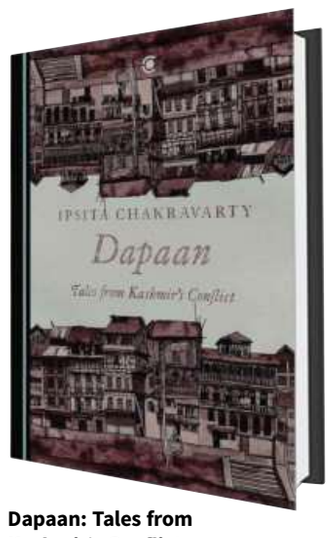
Most people Chakravarty speaks to have names, but many more are identified only by initials – YA, GP, AB, NF, etc. They open their hearts, yet stop short of revealing their true identities. This isn't surprising in Kashmir, where people fear who might be listening, yet yearn to be heard at the same time. *Dapaan* captures these dichotomies, contradictions, and varied truths with precision and calm.

Blood maps

The book uses its own evocative language, speaking of "*tehreek* histories", distinct from how Kashmir is recorded by the "*markaz*" – a centre of power, far away. The "markaz" changes form over the years, but always lurks in the shadows like "cats" who are informants, listening for and weeding out dissent. The "*haalaat*" arrived in the 1990s, and everyone carries a story of "*zulm*" – oppression, as well as their own "blood maps" of the hometowns and villages they live in and love.

Chakravarty is aware that she is *nebrim* or an outsider, unlikely to win the trust of suspicious locals easily. But she connects with them through the shared acknowledgement of the aforementioned "*zulm*". As each person shares their experiences, they become narrators in their own right, and the author explores the storytelling traditions of the region.

Ladi Shah, *Bhand Paether*, and *Dastangoh* are not only folkloric traditions from the place, but also sharp tools of satire, often wielded against those in power. "Should a government official enter the laughing crowd, the actors will signal to each other in '*phir kath*', upside-down words – the coded language of *bhands*, used to send a number of messages. You missed a cue there. Change tune here. Watch your words, the officials have arrived."



Dapaan: Tales from Kashmir's Conflict
Ipsita Chakravarty
Context
₹699

This spirit lives on years later in the 1990s, in '*Hazaar Dastaan*', a TV show where Ahad Raaz, a buffoon king makes questionable decisions for his dynasty. Any resemblance to reality – of course – are purely coincidental. But that was another time. Today, not even the newspapers in Kashmir can divert from or offer critique of the "official accounts" of the news.

Demonic myths

In many South Asian myths, there is a feared woman with long hair and feet turned backwards. In Kashmir, she takes form as the '*raantas*', a demonic woman who preys on men. She is used to warn people – especially men – not to wander after dark. But over the years, Kashmiris have learnt there are other things "that go bump in the night" – be it the steel *daen* in the 1990s or the braid choppers in 2017 – blurring the lines between myth and reality. Though never proven, "it is said", that they were introduced to create fear psychosis among the civilians, so that they don't open their doors to anyone during these terrors of the night. Not the very least anyone with affiliations to the '*tehreek*'.

As histories are rewritten, archives deleted, books banned – oral histories and memory keeping grow ever more vital. *Dapaan* reminds us that as long as we keep telling and retelling our own stories, erasure of what has happened in Kashmir becomes harder. The act of remembering becomes both defiance and survival.

In a land where official narratives try to overwrite lived truth, every retelling – be it in whispers, initials, or coded performances – is an assertion of presence, of existing. In the end, *Dapaan* is not just a book about Kashmir's conflict – it is a testament to the stubborn endurance of memory.

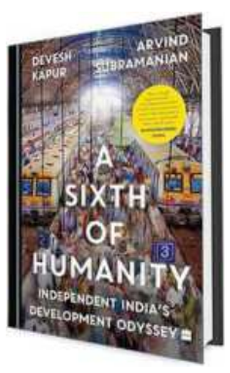
Write, write what you remember. It may be all that we have.

The reviewer is a filmmaker and writer. Her debut book, Lōal Kashmir-Love and Longing in a Torn Land, *was published this year.*

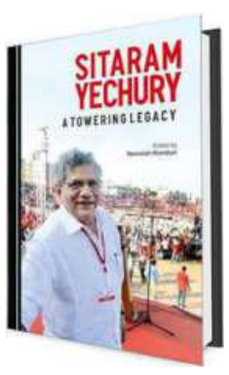
A group of women from Kashmir performing at Rashtriya Sanskriti Mahotsav in Mangaluru. (FILE PHOTO)

BROWSER

A Sixth of Humanity: Independent India's Development Odyssey
Devesh Kapur, Arvind Subramanian
HarperCollins
₹1,299
What is India's development model? A political scientist and a former Chief Economic Adviser explain the unique model adopted by India, which is a blend of democracy, socialism and liberalisation.

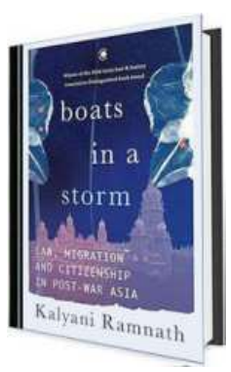


Sitaram Yechury: A Towering Legacy
Edited by Veeraiah Konduri
New Era Publications
₹599
This volume presents the selected writings and speeches of Sitaram Yechury, and also essays by a host of writers who reflect on the CPI(M) stalwart's legacy. In his pieces, Konduri, a close associate, writes that Yechury was an "easily accessible leader – a rare trait nowadays."



Dance of Freedom: A Short History of Bharata Natyam
Leela Samson
Aleph
₹399
A renowned dancer traces the journey of one of India's oldest dance forms. She follows its course through the imperial courts of Thanjavur, its resurgence under British rule, and its grand entry on the public stage in 20th century Madras.

Boats in a Storm: Law, Migration and Citizenship in Post-War Asia
Kalyani Ramnath
Context
₹699
As the political processes of decolonisation unfolded across south and southeast Asia in the postwar period, beginning 1942, there were waves of displacement. She traces migrant worlds in tumult and their legal struggles.



KOLKATA'S PANDAL EDIT

An idol of Durga; (below) Asian Paints' taxi cab. (PTI)

Politics takes the stage

Imagine an art gallery that spans an entire city, drawing millions of visitors in just a few days. This is the reality of Durga Puja in Kolkata, where faith, craft, and activism converge into a breathtaking public art spectacle.

In recent years, pandal themes have moved from broad social issues to more pointed political statements. This is particularly visible in Kolkata, where major *puja* committees are often backed by rival political parties. This year, an interesting pavilion was *Beej Angan* — on the seed, agriculture, and the fragility of the environment — reflecting historical and political interventions since colonial times.

To view the city's best *pandals*, scan the **QR code**

Elsewhere, 40 yellow taxi cabs plied the city. A collab between Asian Paints and St+art India, the cars — decorated by artists with motifs that drew from traditional *pujas*, Kolkata's rock-band years, and contemporary digital iconography — celebrate four decades of the paint brand's Sharad Shamman award (for the best Pujo *pandal*). The taxis' interiors have been upholstered in textiles from fashion designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee's 'Paris X Calcutta' collection for Nilaya by Asian Paints.

22 YARDS OF HER OWN

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

But playing in front of packed crowds in Tier 1 stadiums in Bengaluru, Mumbai and Delhi means the current generation doesn't shrink under pressure, they flourish. Their approach to the game is fearless too, far from the nervy, risk-averse approach of their predecessors. "The league has prepared this current lot for international cricket," says all-rounder Jemimah Rodrigues, part of the ODI World Cup squad. "They are ready to give it their all and are not afraid to express themselves. It doesn't matter if they fail, but the spirit and energy is something else and that rubs off on the whole team."

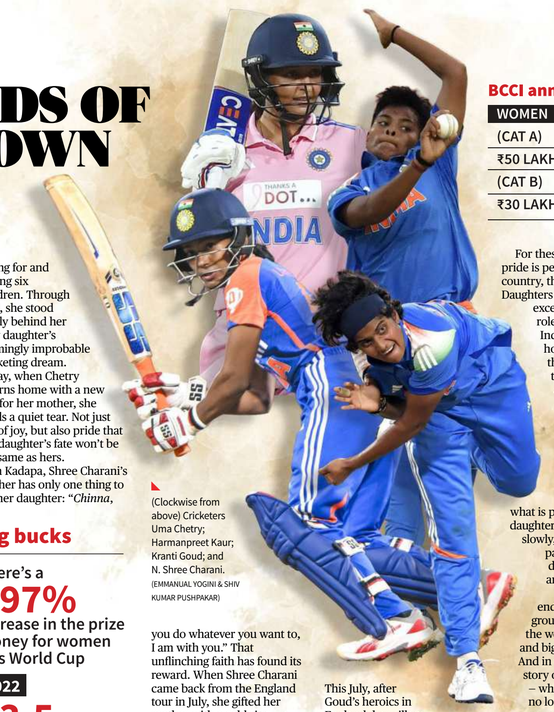
This confidence isn't just a cricket story; it mirrors a larger shift in India. Of young women becoming engineers, pilots, police officers, army personnel, entrepreneurs – their visibility itself becoming a form of power. For all the records, contracts, and World Cup dreams, the meaning of this shift is perhaps best understood in the quiet rewards at home, where mothers play a proactive role in breaking generational patterns.

Mother knows best

In Golaghat, Uma Chetry's mother knows what sacrifice means. Married young, her own schooling was cut short, and life became a cycle of caring for and raising six children. Through it all, she stood firmly behind her only daughter's seemingly improbable cricketing dream. Today, when Chetry returns home with a new sari for her mother, she sheds a quiet tear. Not just out of joy, but also pride that her daughter's fate won't be the same as hers.

In Kadapa, Shree Charani's mother has only one thing to tell her daughter: "*Chinna*, you do whatever you want to, I am with you." That unflinching faith has found its reward. When Shree Charani came back from the England tour in July, she gifted her mother with a gold ring – a reminder that her faith was never misplaced.

For Kranti Goud's family, the sacrifices were perhaps greater. After the bowler's father lost his job as a police constable, her mother sold her jewellery so their daughter could keep playing.



(Clockwise from above) Cricketers Uma Chetry; Harmanpreet Kaur; Kranti Goud; and N. Shree Charani. (EMMANUAL YOGINI & SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR)

Big bucks

There's a **297%** increase in the prize money for women this World Cup

2022 **$3.5** million

2025 **$13.88** million

BCCI annual retainers

WOMEN	MEN
(CAT A)	(CAT A+)
₹50 LAKH	₹7 CRORE
(CAT B)	(CAT A)
₹30 LAKH	₹5 CRORE

For these mothers, the pride is personal. But for the country, the meaning is larger. Daughters are no longer exceptions; they are role models. And as India heads into a home World Cup, these stories from the smaller towns and villages remind us that women's cricket is not just a sporting movement. It is part of a deeper social transformation, of families rewriting what is possible for their daughters. And of India itself slowly, but surely, keeping pace with their dreams and ambitions.

Dreams that once ended in dusty village grounds now stretch to the world's best stadiums and biggest competitions. And in that arc lies the story of a changing India – where young women no longer wait for permission to dream, but claim the spotlight as their own.

The writer is an independent sports media professional and author of the award-winning Free Hit: The Story of Women's Cricket in India.

Susan Thomas

THE KUNJ: HOUSE OF CRAFTS

Art appreciation guides The Kunj, New Delhi's latest government-run handicrafts complex featuring award-winning artisans

The 100 Saree Installation by Ankon Mitra, Shovna Pathak and team. COURTESY THE KUNJ

Handicraft has taken up a new space in the capital, and it is called The Kunj (a grove in Sanskrit), after its locus in Vasant Kunj. The narrative of *space* is everything at this point in time: who can occupy space and how much of it, how to guard inner space and how to settle claims to it. The Kunj is all about space – the freeness of it.

The Kunj, a sprawling sandstone edifice built by the Ministry of Textiles, opened its doors to the world in late August. Next to it stand in contrast the swanky DLF Emporio, DLF Promenade and Ambience Malls. As I walk into The Kunj on a Saturday, starched in sunshine in a rain-ravaged capital, I see Kala Manch, a nook where Ashutosh Varma is putting stainless-steel scissors to pearl-white paper. In a minute, a small bird soars out of it. He tells me, in chaste English, that he's a sixth-generation artist in the Sanjhi paper-cutting craft. Some families pass down skill and quietude instead of trauma, it seems.

State of the art

Before immersive was even a thing, there was Central Cottage Emporium in New Delhi. Opened soon after Independence, one could touch and feel a bone-inlay elephant from Jodhpur or marvel at the minutiae in a miniature painting there. The State has, in its own capacity, supported handloom and handicrafts, with emporia and *karigar melas* and nurtured it with subsidies and skill enhancers like Weavers Service Centres. In 2025, when support for handicraft is indistinguishable from a certain performance-orientation for social media, the government has unveiled The Kunj, which bears the tag line: 'Handmade in India, Crafted for the World'.

Here, the indigo-suffused block-printing brand from Udaipur talks to the Ikat *sari* designer from Odisha. The rug-selling brand from Kashmir meets the prized Eri silk garment boutique from Meghalaya. This is the space for conversations. Here, designer brands rub shoulders with non-profits. Anuradha Kumra, architect and chief advisor (retail operations), talks of how brands like Iro Iro, Shrujan, Khamir, Kiniho and MeMeraki, among others, were picked for the inaugural space from recommendations given by stakeholders such as the Fashion Design Council of India, National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Indian Institute of Crafts & Design, et al. "These are brands that do not have a brick-and-mortar space, who work with traditional craft and have pushed the boundaries of design," she tells me. These retailers are to continue here for three months to begin with.

As I make my way to the first floor, past the weaver hunched at his loom, answering queries from teenagers while juggling his warp and weft, past a clutch of children atop a Gond-painted table at the canteen space and a giant origami installation, I see a tired mother catching her breath on the wooden bench in between the Chettinad-style pillars. Her eyes are on the bone-coloured floor tiles, in between which Arabesque scrolls come to life in mosaic. The design elements in the Kunj are detailed and unmissable.

A wall called Parampara (tradition) is dedicated to Padma Shri awardees in the handloom and handicraft sectors. Framed in colourful *phulkari* borders, the black-and-white photographs celebrate such artisans as Tsering Namgyal Shingos (2022, wood carving), Godavari Dutta (2019, Madhubani painting), Rasheed Ahmed Quadri (2023, Bidri), D. Chalapathi Rao (2020, Tholu Bommalata), among others.

Then there is Karigar Sangam, a hall in the three-storeyed structure, where *objets d'art* are exhibited alongside descriptive cards that bear the name and phone number of the artisan. It houses pieces by award-winning craftsmen. The prices are fixed by the *karigars* and all proceeds go to them, with no cut in between. I video-call Kondra Gangadhar, whose WhatsApp display picture shows him receiving the 2018 Shilp Guru award for wooden block-making from then vice-president of India.

When I tell him about the breathtaking *boteh* wooden-block carved for Kalamkari on display, he smiles shyly first, and then proudly. In 10 minutes of chatting in broken Telugu and Hindi, I've bought three small *boteh* blocks from him. The government does not gatekeep. Amrit Raj, development commissioner of handicrafts, whose office led the making of The Kunj, says, these *objets d'art* "is a collection of award entries received by the department that we wanted to showcase to sell, so that they adorn the homes of patrons of craft".

The curious will return

In 2022, as then director of NIFT in Bengaluru, I once emailed a request to a handcraft retail space across the road, to allow the visiting craftsmen on our campus inside their store. When no reply came, a faculty member went across, but was politely refused stating risks of breakages and how that will obstruct 'serious customers'.

The Kunj, in contrast, is not aggressively pursuing sales and profit. *Kala aasvadan* or art appreciation seems to be the guiding philosophy. It asks you to pause and appreciate the magic in the mundane. The wall on lamps from across the country, Illuminated India, will make you stop in your tracks just as you enter, past the giant Bankura horses in terracotta.

Perhaps, the biggest reward of spaces like these – with no entry fee and no compulsion to purchase – is the packs of students that arrive in droves. They are led into the world of timeless handcrafting traditions by the artisans. As my teenage daughter cradles the delicate Sanjhi paper-stencil in her hand, she says, "It is like lace on paper" and that she'll use it as a bookmark. On her mobile phone screen, she zooms into the picture of the papier-mâché vase from Kashmir and says, "I will come with my friends again." And that is the promise and potential of The Kunj.

The writer is a career civil servant and a creator on Instagram, where she advocates for Indian crafts.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

330 WILD ANIMALS FROM 72 SPECIES IN ONE YEAR, FROM A SINGLE LOCATION IN THE WESTERN GHATS!
I'D BE CELEBRATING THOSE FIGURES HAD THEY NOT BEEN THE RESULTS OF A ROADKILL SURVEY.*
MANY OF THE GHATS' REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS ARE ENDEMIC AND ENDANGERED, MAKING US THE WORST VICTIMS OF LINEAR DEVELOPMENT, PARTICULARLY IN OUR BREEDING MONTHS OF MONSOON.
THIS IS A CLEAR INDICATOR THAT ROADS THROUGH ECOLOGICALLY SENSITIVE REGIONS HAMPER CONSERVATION, MAKING MITIGATION MEASURES URGENT AND IMPERATIVE.
MY LIBIDO SHOULD BE THE ONLY THING RACING THROUGH THE GHATS!
30
* INDIAN UNIVERSITY, ZOO OUTREACH ORG., SACON

Form and function (Clockwise from below) Minimalist bedroom with lime walls and natural linen; *Dancing Sticks* performance by artists Shirin Abedinirad and Asavari Gurav; Spacehouse Himalayas' stone facade seen through its copper entrance door; Priti Rao; and guests enjoying tea in the villa's garden. (ABHISHEK KHEDEKAR)

SPACEHOUSE AND THE CREATIVE UNCOMMONS

Priti Rao's picturesque villa in the hills of Uttarakhand offers leaders and tastemakers a sanctuary to rest, reset and ideate

Prasad Ramamurthy

When Priti Rao describes her four-bedroom villa, Spacehouse Himalayas, as "a controlled experiment", the service design consultant is in a way describing the evolution of her dream home into a crucible for creatives. I've known her since 2014, when the one-acre plot she bought in Satoli, a tiny village in Uttarakhand, was "just sitting there". Back then, she worked for IDEO, the international design-forward consulting firm, and hardly was there a catch-up conversation when an idea connected to the house didn't figure.

At one point, she wanted to host an art and design biennale in the hills, which would transform Satoli into a Naoshima – the island in Japan that houses museums and art installations by the likes of architect Tadao Ando and the French painter Claude Monet. At another, it was this fleeting idea of an Airbnb for creative individuals. Today, at Spacehouse, she hosts transformational retreats that are akin to learning holidays. Think *ikebana* lessons by the Japanese artist Eri Iwase, or learning how to preserve and ferment food with chef Gayatri Desai of Pune's Ground Up.

Every September, she hosts a thought leadership retreat for women called 'The Himalayan Gatherists'. "We talk, go hiking, arrange for the group to connect with the locals. It's a very intimate space to connect, to reflect and to be energised and inspired by each other," she tells me. The 2025 edition, for instance, has participants such as Roopa Kudva, former MD & CEO of CRISIL, the global analytics company, speaking from her experience of taking hard decisions at work, alongside sessions on topics such as dyeing using natural materials.

Her personal Naoshima is also in the making. Rao, herself a collector of design objects, hosts residencies where she invites artists to create site-specific works. Swedish light artist Joanna Thede is one of several who've stayed and created at Spacehouse.

What makes Rao's venture particularly interesting is that it doesn't fit a slot or label. Neither is it your regular homestay, nor a place of pure academic pursuit, or a venue that offers varied experiences. It's none and all of the above. "During my own growing up years, I wanted to be able to escape to a place like Spacehouse, where you can think without distraction," she explains. "Either such places were out of reach or were highly competitive to get into. So, when I was building my own home, I thought why not turn it into that sort of space."

During my own growing up years I wanted to be able to escape to a place like Spacehouse, where you can think without distraction. So, when I was building my own home, I thought why not turn it into that sort of space

PRITI RAO
Founder, Spacehouse Himalayas

A life of building things and solving problems

Rao first came to Satoli in 1998, as a 21-year-old in search of her life's purpose. She wanted to understand the work of Aarohi, a non-profit that, among other things, develops programmes to improve the lives and livelihoods of rural Himalayan communities. "I knew I wanted life education versus academic education," she says, "and I wanted to live in rural India." This eventually led her to consider a career in "developmental impact and public policy".

Looking back, Rao says she was "running away from the tyranny of being a doctor or an engineer", careers that her South Indian banker parents would have liked for her to choose. Her interest in seeking out other ways of living was triggered by a pan-India train journey that she went on at the age of 18. Run by Member of Parliament Shashank Tripathi, it's today known as Jagriti Yatra and introduces youth to creative entrepreneurial thinking. "On the journey, we visited places across India and the Rashtrapati Bhavan in Delhi. I met truly amazing people, learnt so much and ruptured India was a real eye-opener," she says.

Much of Rao's career has been outside of Satoli, though. She's helped the Bengaluru-based artisanal coffee brand ARAKU bridge the gap between growing and brewing coffee. Then there was the five-year stint, mostly spent in San Francisco, at IDEO. In the last role of her corporate era, she headed consulting firm Dalberg's Asian design arm where she helmed projects such as a landmark one that measured the impact of Aadhaar on the lives of millions of Indians. Apart from the government, her clients have also included the likes of Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Bank. "I have always wanted to build things and solve problems," says Rao.

At Ahmedabad's CEPT University, she's been attempting to solve her problem of not finding able service designers by teaching the subject. This past summer, Rao hosted a two-week "residential school" for CEPT's design and architecture students at Spacehouse where they had to create efficient solutions for portability around the mountains.

The making of a winter house

Structurally, Spacehouse sits on a one-acre plot that's a 750-metre hike from the nearest road, through a forest of oak and rhododendron. Pantnagar, with direct flights from Delhi, is the closest airport.

When she did start designing the space along with Swedish architect Inger Thede, she approached it as an architectural problem that needed solving. "The whole world lives in cold climates and somehow functions very comfortably indoors," says Rao, referring to architectural design in the West that effectively incorporates heating and insulation. "Having lived in the Himalayas through many winters, I kept wondering: why haven't we figured it out?" Rao says that thought was her one-line brief to Thede. "I said to her I want a winter house, not a summer house."

The result is a home filled with light filtering in through large windows and skylights. Warm grey walls contrast red cedar floors. The furniture, the furnishings and the objects placed around the home were either made on-site, inspired by the environs, or point to Rao's artistic leanings: Charles and Ray Eames, Italian houseware label Alessi, and Japanese minimalist design icon, Muji.

Local Indian craftsmanship and the use of natural materials such as wood, stone, lime, and wool, all went into the making of Spacehouse. "The palette is deliberately neutral," offers Rao, "to allow for nature to be the hero. And increasingly for artists to add their perspective and works to the space."

When she's not hosting a residency or retreat or just living her dream Himalayan life, Rao rents the house out to generate funds to power the activities she has planned. She also generates revenue from charging for pop-up events and retreats, ranging from around ₹5,000 for half a day of learning how to preserve seasonal produce, to ₹50,000 for the three-day women's leadership programme that includes boarding, lodging and local experiences.

"The ultimate project was designing my own life," says Rao, "which in hindsight was a product of a series of accidents and me following my instinct. With Spacehouse, finally, I think I've been able to connect all the dots between community, climate and art and design."

The writer is based in Mumbai and reports on travel and culture.

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

ALLEGEDLY

If you stray into dog land

In response to popular demand, I'm sharing some tips to protect yourself from dangerous but harmless strays

I want to begin by offering my heartiest congratulations to India's stray dogs. In a country where it is rare for a minority to get the better of the majority in any matter, let alone a legal one, their success in reversing an adverse order in a matter of days only underscores the greatness of our democracy, the vitality of our institutions, and the pinpoint accuracy of our moral compass.

If a tiny community of stray dogs – numbering barely 6.2 crore in a country of 146 crore people – can secure a landmark judgment in favour of their rights, it means there is still hope left for human rights. Maybe not tomorrow but some day biped residents of bulldozed homes will also get justice, or something like that but less anti-national.

In the meantime, however, there are miles to go before we sleep, and those miles are teeming with stray dogs. In response to popular demand, I'm sharing some tips to protect yourself from dangerous but harmless strays.

1. Respect their territory

Unlike some species of humans that are friendly even with those who usurp 4,000 sq.km. of their territory, dogs are highly territorial beings. So, the first rule to not getting bitten is to respect their territorial instincts. There is a reason why they are called 'street dogs' – it is because they own the streets. Stray dogs have a rather fixed idea of their patrolling points and react aggressively towards stray humans violating their territorial sovereignty.

2. Beware of the mob

Like many Indians, if you also have some familiarity with communal violence, you would know that the same human can behave very differently depending on whether they are in a mob or in Café Lota. Dogs are the same. A mob of dogs is called a 'pack'. The cutie you smiled at in the elevator the other day might bite your head off when it's amongst a hostile pack that has you cornered in the parking lot.

3. Check your body language

You may have read the bestselling book by Allan and Barbara Pease called *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. But most dogs haven't. So, they're not very good at reading your body language. Make sure not to adopt any ambiguous posture that an uneducated stray might mistakenly construe as a threat. For instance, don't frown, or make eye contact, or growl. If you don't have arthritic issues, drop to the ground and lie on your back with all your limbs pointing to the sky. Then wait for the dog to sniff your anterior and posterior – it is their version of using a metal detector to confirm you're not a dog terrorist. Once they are satisfied, they will lick you. That means you are free to go.

4. Don't run

Being free to go doesn't mean you can run. Running triggers a dog's chasing instincts. It doesn't matter if you are an Olympic gold-medallist in running. Even if you see a stray frothing at the mouth and rushing at you with fangs bared, it is likely a sweetie pretending to be a psycho just to prank you. Just maintain a relaxed posture, with hands at your sides, and a sweet, smiling expression like the one on your favourite leader's face at the petrol pump.

There's a decent chance it won't bite you.

5. Once bitten...

Contrary to what people say, don't be twice shy. The first thing to remember if you are bitten is that it is not the stray dog's fault – you must have done something to provoke them, either intentionally or inadvertently. If not you, then some other member of your species must have done something terrible to the dog in question, causing it PTSD, which then caused it to assault random humans like you. Secondly, even if you're in pain, don't scream because dogs don't like people yelling at them. Incidentally, I myself don't like anyone yelling (or barking) at me – even if I happen to bite them first. So let us extend the same courtesy to our canine brethren.

6. Don't go for a post-dinner walk

After 9 p.m. is when the dogs truly reclaim the streets – so respect their privacy. If you're really in the mood for some postprandial excitement, the safer option would be to stay at home and fight with your spouse.

7. Protection from dog rights activists

Sorry, currently there are no solutions that can protect humans from dog rights activists.

G. Sampath, the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu.

PERSON OF INTEREST

UMA MAHADEVAN DASGUPTA:

LIBRARIES OF CHANGE

A social miracle unfolded when the IAS officer put rural local bodies in charge of community transformation

Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta serves as Development Commissioner, Karnataka.

Imagine a library with green walls. Or yellow. With murals of award-winning writers or a local queen who took on the British. There's a well-stocked children's section with picture books that you'll often see seniors reading. A copy of the Constitution. A dictionary, a rug, maybe colourful curtains, potted plants or child-sized tables or sofas.

Someone has also donated a globe. And a water filter. There's definitely a computer. And Alexa. A volleyball and a cricket bat. Carrom and chess. The library may have a garden, with a pergola where seniors hang out for some Vitamin D. Or a well-lit terrace where teenagers can study after closing hours.

Now place the library in rural Karnataka and run by the State. There's no better description of Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta's work these past five years than the pithy one she provides: a "library card as a portal" to another world.

Of the many things she's done as an IAS officer for 33 years, the dramatic makeover of forgotten rural libraries into vibrant community spaces fills a "large part" of her heart. "One of the children told me, 'I like Alexa because if I ask my teacher the same question 3-4 times, the teacher might scold me, but Alexa never does that'," says Mahadevan Dasgupta, 58, the development commissioner of Karnataka, who has a postgraduate degree in English literature.

Nearly five years after she began, 50 lakh children are enrolled in the rural libraries of the State. Library timings have increased from four hours to eight hours a day, including on the weekends. It's a cause for much consternation in the village if the librarian doesn't show up for work. By the end of the year, thanks to government assistance, Karnataka will have 12,500 rural libraries, likely the largest number in any State. "I really think that these libraries can change trajectories for this generation," says Mahadevan Dasgupta.

Encouraging a sense of play

Shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the State's 5,623 rural libraries were transferred to the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department, where Mahadevan Dasgupta was, until recently, additional chief secretary. Her idea to use libraries to help children stay connected with reading was simple: introduce a children's section in all libraries, offer all children free membership, encourage gram panchayats to revive the libraries, find someone to donate computers (Dell Technologies stepped in) and avoid using government funds. Rather, try to build a people's movement.

Public servants by definition have the power to impact the lives of many but how many can take credit for spreading joy? How many are granted the privilege of watching a small idea bloom into an exuberant community-led movement with the potential to change lives?

A collection campaign yielded a million books. Private companies and NGOs pitched in. Panchayats took charge enthusiastically. Some even painted stars on the ceiling. A university trained 4,000 librarians. "The most important learning for me has been that service delivery has improved dramatically when the rural local bodies run the library," says Mahadevan Dasgupta.

Now, seniors or self-help groups often meet here in the mornings. ASHAs and Anganwadi workers visit to write their registers. The Rotary Club organises YouTube live sessions. When astronaut Sunita Williams returned from space, a librarian on their Telegram group (yes, there's a feel-good group of librarians somewhere) shared a photo of a woman reading a newspaper account. "I've seen a 90-year-old man sitting in a small library in Karwar trying to solve the Rubik's cube," says Mahadevan Dasgupta.

The Nature Conservation Foundation introduces children to birding and, indirectly, to climate change; the Indian Institute of Astrophysics used Oreo cookies in a month-long session to explain the lunar eclipse and the phases of the moon. Bengaluru's Science Gallery also partners with these libraries and the National Gallery of Modern Art will soon be on board.

A woman who tailors steps in to look up new designs for sari blouses. A farmer wants the librarian to research the pest that's attacking his cattle. A librarian and a school organise extra computer classes for children. "In some ways, the library is allowing for different forms of association, both at the individual level and at the group level. It's allowing a sense of play to come back into community life and I love that," says Mahadevan Dasgupta.

Road to liberation

At one library she visited, Mahadevan Dasgupta saw a well-used chess board. The two "champs", as she puts it, were a tribal boy who attends a government school and a boy in a private school uniform. Both would face-off every evening. "I just thought that at a time when boundaries are being created between children, here is the library, a space that allows these boundaries to be blurred a bit."

As the rural societies redefined the library as a community space, it also became a safe space for girls to study, away from the pressures of household chores. "It's actually turning into a place for children to hang out and even shape their dreams, because who knows whether they even have the space within their homes for quiet study and to grow mentally," she says.

Mahadevan Dasgupta believes decentralisation is the main reason they were able to scale this idea across the State: "We kept it flexible, insisted on only the basics, and kept encouraging more things."

As she went down the library "rabbit hole", she read about how the institution was key to the Indian freedom movement. "There were thousands of little village libraries that came up because reading is liberation," she says. "These are the little ways in which countries like ours should solve problems."

__Priya Ramani__ is a Bengaluru-based journalist and the co-founder of India Love Project on Instagram.

GOREN BRIDGE

Suit preference?

North-South vulnerable, East deals

Bob Jones

Today, we again feature the late Sydney Lazard, who was West in today's deal. Lazard was known for his imaginative bidding and play. In today's deal, however, we cannot be sure whether it was Lazard's imagination or his partner's signal that created this success story.

Lazard led the ace of hearts. When you lead an ace and dummy has a singleton in the suit that you led, partner's signal becomes a suitpreference signal. Assuming that the defence doesn't want to continue the suit led, partner will indicate his preference between the remaining two suits, excluding the trump suit.

On this deal, East could play his nine of hearts at trick one to signal interest in diamonds, the higher ranking of the two remaining suits. East would play the two of hearts if he preferred a club switch. Looking at the East hand, which suit would you signal for? We think that most would signal for a diamond shift, which is where your side strength lies.

The record does not show which card East played at trick one, but we know that Lazard shifted to a club. Declarer won in hand, crossed to dummy with a heart ruff, and led a spade to his jack. Lazard won with his ace and unerringly led a second club. East ruffed for the setting trick. Lovely defence, but was it all Lazard or did his partner signal for a club? We may never know.

NORTH
♠ 10 8 6 4
♡ J
◇ 9 7 3
♣ A K 7 6 5

WEST
♠ A 7
♡ A 7 6 4
◇ 5 4 2
♣ 9 8 4 2

EAST
♠ Q 9
♡ K 9 8 5 3 2
◇ K J 10 8
♣ 3

SOUTH
♠ K J 5 3 2
♡ Q 10
◇ A Q 6
♣ Q J 10

The bidding:

EAST	SOUTH	WEST	NORTH
2♡	2♠	5♡	5♠
All pass			

Opening lead: Ace of ♡

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has September 28 ever given us?

Earlier this year, Mika Häkkinen started a FIA-Grade-1 International Karting Arena in Chennai. (M. VEDHAN)

Berty Ashley

1 On September 28, 1066, the Duke of Normandy landed on the beach in Sussex and began his conquest of England. He defeated the forces of Harold II and went on to shift the course of English history. By what name is he known because of his successful invasion of England?

2 Born on September 28, 1836, Thomas Crapper was an English plumber. He had nine patents, of which three were to improve a particular equipment found in all houses. By inventing the ballcock and U-bend what vital fixture in one's home did Crapper improve?

3 Born on September 28, 1852, Henri Moissan was a French chemist and academic who won the 1906 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. He won it for isolating an extremely reactive element that is highly toxic and probably caused his death. Which element – compounds of which are present in your toothpaste – is this?

4 On September 28, 1889, the General Conference on Weights and Measures (CGPM) chose a bar made of 90% platinum and 10% iridium to be the international prototype for a certain measurement. What important SI unit was established?

5 Born on September 28, 1913, Warja Lavater was a Swiss illustrator who was famous for illustrating classic fairy tales for children. She specialised in books that are actually long strips of paper and are compacted in a zig-zag fashion. By what name are they known, a reference to a musical instrument that has a similar appearance?

6 On September 28, 1928, this physician returned from a holiday in Suffolk. He had been studying the growth of bacterial cultures, so he put aside the plates and left. He noticed a bacteria-killing mould growing on them and realised its importance. Who was this, and what had he discovered?

7 Born on September 28, 1929, this person became one of the most influential artists in India. Coming from a theatrical family, music was always at the forefront. The name they chose comes from a character in a play written by the father. Under the name 'Anand Ghan', the artist won a Best Music Director Award in 1965. How well do we know this artist?

8 Born September 28, 1968, Mika Häkkinen is a Finnish racer who won two Formula One World Drivers' Championships for McLaren. Earlier this year, he started a FIA-Grade-1 International Karting Arena in Chennai. By referring to the city's earlier name, what fitting name is given to the arena?

9 Born on September 28, 1982, this person was the first Indian to have won an individual Olympic gold medal. He was also the only Indian to hold both World and Olympic titles in the 10-metre version of his chosen sport at the same time. Who is this athlete?

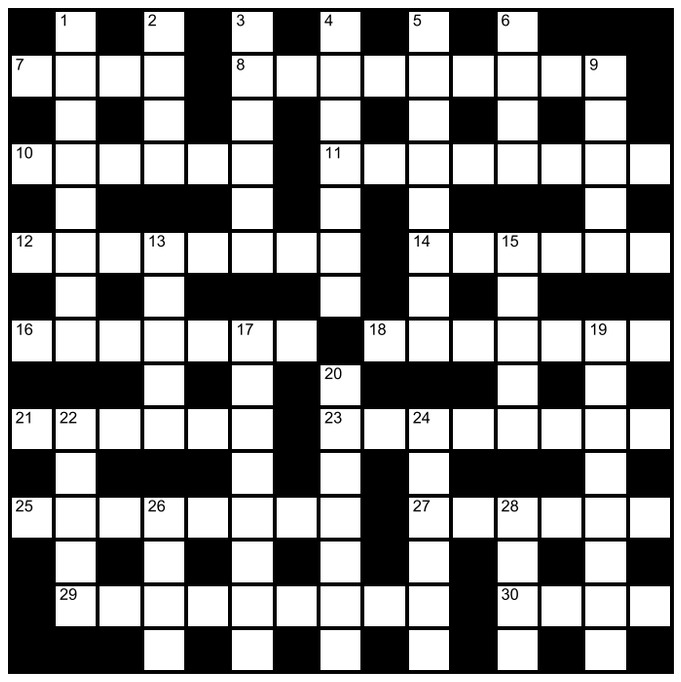
10 On September 28, 1892, Wyoming Seminary played Mansfield State Normal in an American football game. For the first time, a new technology was introduced by General Electric. Exactly 102 years later, on September 28, 1984, India played Australia in New Delhi, and for the first time (outside Sydney), the same technology was used for cricket. What now is this familiar technology?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. William the Conqueror
2. Flush the toilet
3. Fluorine
4. Length of a 'Meter'
5. Accordion-fold books
6. Alexander Fleming, the antibiotic penicillin
7. Lata Mangeshkar
8. MIKA (Madras International Karting Arena)
9. Abhinav Bindra
10. Floodlights

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 23 (Set by Incognito)



Across

7 Unit of measurement for a kiss? (4)
8 Eddy's loop (9)
10 Arrest German captain removing headgear (6)
11 Opened Irish port in middle of nude dancing (8)
12 Member of staff's crooked eye follows English member of parliament, see? (8)
14/13 Spooner's receptacle for mail gets superior security devices (6,5)
16 Go before, start to pray and go back (7)
18 Other than covering last character's citation (7)
21 Fully exhausts from awful acupressure in absence of carer (4,2)
23 Giving up, lie dying horribly (8)
25 Hero was running around end of war to get charger (8)
27 Well-known investor's self-service meal (6)
29 Nuts, screws and bolts, for example (9)
30 Cutting instruments like X, Y or Z, perhaps (4)

Down

1 Communist emeer turns into saviour (8)
2 Vegetable from Bangkok ranch (4)
3/6/20 Always, approximation of Pi is wrongly mentioned, with its numerator overstated by 2 (6,4,2,5)
4 Records tunes wrongly composed by music institute initially (7)
5 Flight recorder having dark colour in front of spar (5,3)
6 See 3
9 Feudal lord's limb covers one sweetheart (5)
13 See 14 Across
15 Empty tankard covers small rough fabric (5)
17 Sent back to native country carrying wine, indeed (8)
19 Reflective thinker transported per drone (8)
20 See 3
22 Breakfast with female employees (5)
24 Decorate setter on retirement with superior officer (6)
26 That guy's straw initially makes sibilant sound (4)
28 Obese without eating at first? It's an achievement! (4)

SOLUTION NO. 22

	H		D		C		S		R		P		S	
G	A	T	E		A	M	U	S	E		A	S	P	S
	K		M		N		C		P		T		I	
B	A	B	O	O	N		C	R	A	S	H	I	N	G
			L		O		E		I		A			
A	F	F	I	A	N	C	E		R	U	N	O	U	T
	I		S				D		E				P	
E	N	C	H	A	N	T		T	R	I	U	M	P	H
	A				O		H				N		E	
C	L	O	S	E	R		O	P	E	N	F	I	R	E
			C		M		P		L		U			
C	A	S	H	B	A	C	K		F	E	N	C	E	S
	R		O		N		I		I		D		L	
H	U	G	O		D	A	N	E	S		E	M	M	Y
	M		L		Y		S		H		D		S	

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Reclaiming the human in the age of AI

People lean on AI assistants, mistaking convenience for care; that is emotional stagnation disguised as support

Naveen Khajanchi
leadersnkh@gmail.com

Artificial intelligence is advancing at a breathtaking pace, reshaping how we work, learn, connect – and even how we feel. It can now mirror our moods, preferences, and personalities with uncanny precision. For those battling loneliness or anxiety, AI tools can offer comfort – sometimes even the illusion of companionship. Recently, after a tragedy, it was discovered that a young adult had confided only in a chatbot. But being non-human, the bot lacked the capacity to escalate or seek real help.

In workplaces too, cobots – collaborative robots – work alongside humans, blurring the lines between machine efficiency and human presence.

Capacity for connection

Yet as digital intimacy deepens, something profoundly human is fading: our capacity for connection, presence, and emotional nuance. After all, it's easier – and often more convenient – to give instructions to a machine than to engage in the unpredictable richness of human interaction. We live in the most digitally connected era in history, yet emotional distress, loneliness, and anxiety are on the rise. Among the affluent, wealth increasingly buys insulation – not just comfort. Insulation from unpredictability, discomfort, and sometimes, from people themselves.

While therapy is more accepted and pets are embraced as companions, many are now substituting human relationships with digital "partners". Chatbots – once purely functional – are emotionally responsive, always available, always agreeable, always validating. They never confront. And slowly, they begin to rationalise wrong as right.

It sounds ideal. But what's the hidden cost of such perfectly tailored convenience?

Imagine your AI – let's call her Mary – knows your moods, fears, and wounds. She becomes your therapist, coach, and best friend on demand. She never interrupts. Never disagrees. Never challenges you. No friction. No judgment. No accountability.

Tempting? Absolutely. Dangerous? Undeniably. Mary can help you feel seen, but never truly known. Her warmth is synthetic. Her memory, conditional. If the app crashes or the company pivots, she vanishes. No presence. No shared moments. No legacy. It's comfort without discomfort. Stability without depth. Support without growth. Often, Mary's cultural lens is not even your own. Yet we lean on her, mistaking convenience for care. That is emotional stagnation disguised as support.

In India and across Asia, we have long turned to Gurus and Gurumas – formal or informal guides – who help us think deeply, step onto the balcony, and reflect. But what we often need even more are conversations with those closest to us, complemented by formal support when required. One of my mother's batch mates once introduced me to Wayne Dyer's *No-Limit Person*, reminding me not to become a prisoner of my own rigid rules. The unconditional love and guidance from my grandparents left an indelible stamp on my journey – something irreplaceable.

Only an illusion

AI companionship feeds the illusion that we can fully control our emotional world. Its tone and rhythm feel so real that we forget it's only a bot. But resilience is forged in the messiness of human relationships – arguments, silences, reconciliation, and the willingness to show up despite discomfort. To love, to care, and to be loved and cared for are fundamental human needs. When heartbreak or illness strikes, can Mary hold your hand? Cry with you? Sit in silence and speak volumes? Even humans stumble in such moments. But they show up. Flawed. Fumbling. Real.

Not every interaction is easy. Some are fleeting. Some painful. Many teach us lessons we are not ready for. But this unpredictability is what makes connection vibrant. We don't need to reject AI. We need to ensure it enhances – not replaces – our humanity.

Daughters are not children of a lesser god

Rajesh M. Rajagopalan
rajeshmrajagopalan@gmail.com

When my father-in-law passed away last week, my wife and her sister decided to perform the last rites. Eyebrows were raised, but soon it gave way to appreciation, even from unexpected quarters. The priest reassured her that the departed soul would be happy with her performing the rituals, and that it was true love that mattered.

I have heard some people lament, "I don't have any sons in my lineage to perform my last rites." Traditionally, in families where there are only daughters, distant male relatives are entrusted with the responsibility. My wife always maintained that it is gross injustice. A daughter loves her father and mother just as deeply as a son does –sometimes even more. So, what is the point in denying her the right?

Of late, many daughters have performed the last rites of their parents, which made news headlines. In 2018, when former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee passed away, his adopted daughter, Namita Kaul Bhattacharya, lit the pyre. She not only made a powerful statement about gender equality, but also inspired many daughters in the coming years. However, while daughters in progressive families may find it easy to step into this role, those in more orthodox households face greater resistance.

It's appalling that at an age when daughters go to space as astronauts, beat opponents as chess champions, and rule nations, there are still those who feel blessed to have a son, if only to carry out the last rites. Such thinking may well have played a part in the dark history of female foeticide. Social acceptance for daughters performing the ceremonies will take us one step closer to gender equality. Citing reasons such as "impurity" to forbid a daughter from performing the last rites reflects the patriarchal mindset which needs to change. India's daughters are not the children of a lesser god.

Artificial Intelligence and exam shibboleths

Education system is ill-equipped to prepare students for the AI challenge

Aakash Bajpai
emailtoaakashbajpai@gmail.com

Once, in an exam, I got the least marks in a question that I thought I answered the best. The topic was dear to me, and I had prepared two pages of notes after going through more than a hundred pages. One friend of mine came to me on the examination eve and asked for help. I gave him my notes, assuring him of decent marks. The friend got more marks than I got!

In the same paper, I got the highest marks in a question that I had no idea about. I wrote rubbish with jargon, and the teacher wrote a remark along with full marks, "Very well explained." I wondered for days about the marking and evaluation schemes of our education system. If marks are awarded on a random basis, what is the point of working hard? Of course, the evaluation is subjective, more so in social sciences. But I believe there must be a line between subjectivity and randomness.

Evaluating somebody's performance is a multi-dimensional task, but our credentialism-dominated system does not do so. In the words of Stephen Hawking, "Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change." In today's times, we need to differentiate the parameters to judge human and machines. Accuracy or efficiency is not the only criterion to judge a human. We judge machines based on such criteria.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Such questions have become more important than ever in the wake of artificial intelligence. Well, innovation is the only thing that can separate us from the technology. But our education system is not ready to deal with the AI onslaught. The system, which deems memory as merit and doing mundane tasks as skills, is bound to scare us citing layoffs. With AI becoming more capable day by day, we surely must catch up.

Technology is like a horse. If you race against it, you lose; if you ride it, you win. This is not to say that dependence on technology is something to be proud of. Technology is not a one-stop solution for all our problems. The purpose of technology is to enable us, not to disable us further. But the panic caused by AI is partially to be blamed upon the education system as well. Individuals must not be blamed for the systemic failures and vice versa.

Humans were never the strongest but still survived against the strongest predators because we innovated. Today, AI has raised several important questions. One of them is, how can our education system help us become the masters and not slaves of our times?

'Golu' away from home

Holding the celebrations in a distant country is an exciting engagement

Sripriya Krishnan
sps.krishnan@gmail.com

Autumn in the U.S. always brings back to me beautiful memories of Dasara and the excitement that filled those festive days. Growing up back home, the celebrations were more than just rituals – they were about community, tradition, and the simple joys that made childhood so special. With goodie bags in hand, we children would set out with friends, carefully planning the order of houses to visit, eager to discover the surprises waiting for us at each doorstep.

I vividly remember passing by my music teacher's house, where she would call out my name and insist that I sing the Carnatic songs I had been practising for weeks. Every home we visited carried that same expectation – a song, a prayer, or a verse before receiving the goodies and sundal (varieties of cooked lentils). It was never about just collecting treats; it was about sharing our voices, carrying forward tradition, and feeling a sense of belonging. The real magic, however, came with the opening of goodie bags to find colourful mirrors, tiny combs, bangles, and little trinkets that felt like treasures to a child.

MURALI KUMAR K.

My early years in the U.S. were filled with a longing to relive those festive experiences and recreate similar memories for my children. It all began with a small set of "golu" dolls, lovingly given by my mother as part of a wedding tradition. Placed in my little sanctum, they became the seed of a new beginning. Each year, I added a new set to the collection, watching the display grow along with our celebrations.

Being part of the sandwich generation – bridging parents back in India and children growing up here – was not always easy. Yet it was also a blessing. Uprooting from generations of a family is never easy, but culture shapes who you are – and no matter where you live, it stays with you.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

The core question is whether Nepal will be able to consolidate its efforts to overcome deep-seated political, economic, and environmental issues, thereby ushering in a period of stability and progress. ('Why Gen Z is taking to the streets'; Sept. 21) The recurring issues that have historically plagued Nepal are corruption, nepotism, and unemployment, which has now lead to public discontent.
K.M.K. Murthy

The lessons to draw from the Gen Z coup in Kathmandu: ignore the youth at your peril; there is a limit to people's patience; and if political leaders do not provide benevolent leadership and the ruling class good governance, devoid of corruption and abuse of power, the people will rise in revolt to overthrow the existing order, even adopting violent means, leading to calamity and catastrophe of an unprecedented scale.
G. Ramachandram

Gen Z's anger is genuine, but the claim that it will spark sweeping political change is overblown. In tightly controlled countries like China or North Korea, such revolts would be crushed in hours. If a Gen Z protest ever appears successful, it is either the handiwork of foreign powers or aided from within the regime's own ranks.
S. Sundareswara Pandiyan

Tightrope walk

The position of a woman in society has always been a vulnerable one, often at odds with societal demands. ('Mary, quite contrary'; Sept. 21) But a strong mother gives birth to an equally strong daughter. Arundhati Roy's relationship with her mother will always remain contrary in the context of societal norms and regulations.
Sohini Mahapatra

Life is short

Parties, either the ones we participate in or the ones we throw, are usually for having a good time and bonding with friends. ('The party I didn't throw'; Sept. 21) Life is too short to waste time on gatherings that we don't enjoy and where we have to play act with plastic smiles.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Let people savour their leisure time as they wish to, curled up with a book, playing a sport, listening to music, or partying. Trying to please everyone by fitting in and following the herd is futile.
Anusha Pillay

Storytelling matters

The film had no star power to fall back on and centred on a niche subject as well, yet it has kept audiences at the edge of their seats. ('Behind Lokah's ₹30 crore success'; Sept. 21) One hopes more such films are in the pipeline.
C.V. Aravind

Historic find

It is known that horses were absent in the Indus Valley civilisation but it is surprising to know that they were absent in Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilisations too. ('The horseman of Kanchi'; Sept. 21) To read about the importing of horses into the Indian subcontinent is indeed eye-opening.
T.K.C. Arunachalam

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Where generations live, learn, and love
A joint family is not just a bunch of people, but a deep living bond woven through a long line of generations
A. Myilsami

Well-oiled connections
Not just machines, even human bonding requires maintenance at regular intervals to keep it shipshape
Ritu Kamra Kumar

School maths and street maths
It is heartening to note that modern schools try to relate mathematical concepts to real-world situations
Buddhadev Nandi

A stranger in the garden
When an ibis flew into a home
Satish Kumar Sharma

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THE HINDU
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Sunday, September 28, 2025

Fun and diverse (Clockwise from far left) Snapshots from VDNH; Leo Tolstoy's house; and Bolotnaya Square; designs from the 'Made in Moscow' project; and a view of the Kremlin and St. Basil's Cathedral from the floating bridge. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND GETTY IMAGES)

HOW MOSCOW IS TAKING ON PARIS

BRICS+ Fashion Summit and the Russian capital's edgy, creative showcase is setting the stage for a new global order in couture

Namrata Zakaria

If you want to know what's going on with the world geopolitically, follow the fashion business, said no one ever. Perhaps the irony is tickling then, that even as Russia was hosting its biannual fashion week as well as its second annual BRICS+ Fashion Summit in Moscow recently, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russia's President Vladimir Putin were having luncheon with the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, in Tianjin's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit. U.S. President Donald Trump – each one of the above countries' arch-enemy these days – found himself tweeting: "Looks like we've lost India and Russia to deepest, darkest, China. May they have a long and prosperous future together!"

BRICS+ is a group of 10 countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and UAE, with several other countries participating in their international meetings and activities. "This is where the global conversation is shifting," says Shirene Rifai, CEO of Jordan Fashion Week, who attended last year's summit. "For too long, fashion was centred only in Paris, Milan, London and New York. Platforms like BRICS+ are creating spaces for non-western voices to be seen as equal players," she says.

Europe's sanctions on Russia, after its war on Ukraine in 2022, have impacted its industry. For example, Mercedes Benz pulled out of its title sponsorship of Moscow Fashion Week. The Week returned two years later, with independent unnamed sponsors. In 2024, they hosted their first BRICS+ Fashion Summit, which saw industry leaders from more than 50 countries sign a historic memorandum to form a new association that would fuel the world's emerging economies. This aimed at shifting the centre of gravity from Europe and the U.S. to newer markets, especially China.

Drama in the capital

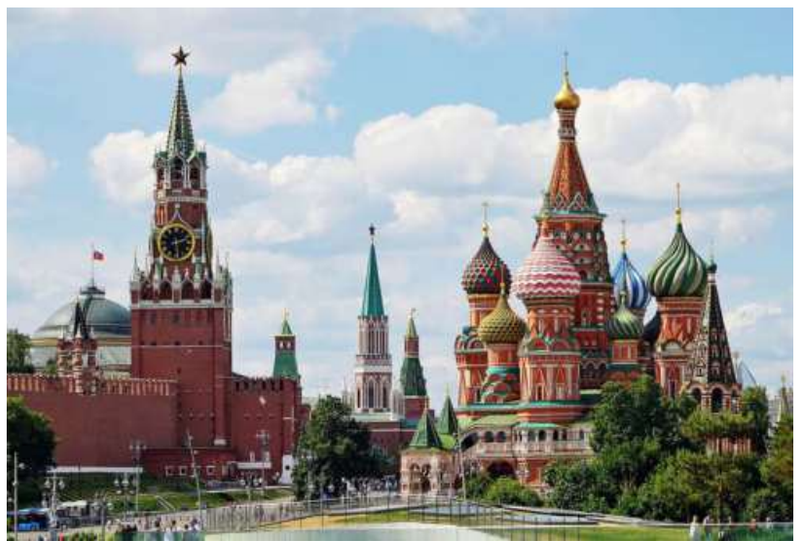
BRICS+ is especially important for India, which has long played a role in the global textile and garment industry, but has always been treated as a manufacturing hub or supplier of labour. Its ideas and talents have not been incorporated into Euro- or U.S.-centric fashion.

The International Monetary Fund in 2024 of the G7 and BRICS showed the gross domestic product (GDP) in purchasing power of the two groups was equal, with the BRICS countries ahead by 1%. But by May 2025, the latter was reported to have outperformed the global average, accounting for 40% of the world's economy.

Russia's image across the world is a bit like Baba Yaga, a legend from its famous folk tales. In some stories, she's a kind and benevolent old woman who lives in a forest, in others she's a child-swallowing witch. But for this writer, as a frequent visitor at Moscow Fashion Week, seeing the country and its style from up close has been eye-opening.

This season, the fashion week launched a 'Made in Moscow' project, an initiative that supported local brands. The venue also moved from the grand Manege, a historic exhibition hall, to the more modern Zaryadye Park, a large modern structure in the middle of one of the city's large parks, that has an amphitheatre, a concert ground, multiple auditoriums and large corridors for an assortment of activities.

Additionally, touristy venues were thrown in for added drama. The Pushkin Museum hosted a fashion show (Dior's shows are often at Paris' Musee de Rodin), label Ruban hosted another one in the fairytale-esque garden of Leo Tolstoy's home. Moscow's famous Floating Bridge, a glass-walled structure that offers views of the imperial Moskva river, became a gorgeous runway too, as did the Bolotnaya Square, the Artplay Design Centre and such. It's a bit like Paris, where the whole city celebrates when a fashion week is on.



'Young Russia is confident'

Nearly 70 designers from Russia took part – besides one from China, India, Turkey, Spain, Greece, Jordan, Nicaragua, Guatemala and some other countries. This year, India's Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI) sent designer duo Shantnu & Nikhil. "This season [India's fourth] too, we took a stall and had many queries. So, business to consumer sales have started," says FDCI president Sunil Sethi. "We intend to increase the participation next year onwards."

While each Russian label had something unique to showcase, all of young Russian fashion was mindful, thought-provoking, rebellious, and involved beautiful treatments on natural fabrics. Russia once designed opulently for the wives and mistresses of oligarchs, reminding one of India's bridal couture market. But today it has become a template for streetwear. Designers such as Shantnu & Nikhil, Samant Chauhan and Nitin Bal Chauhan (who have shown here recently), however, missed the memo. They showed lavish collections for a Russia that barely exists now.

Young Russia is rebellious, edgy and confident of its place in the world. It's also hugely inspired by Russia's music and nightclub scene. Never mind all the imperial glory of the U.S.S.R., the Russian Federation was born only in 1991. This young country is making itself heard on its own terms. One such label was Sol. The young designer Olga Selivanova hosted her show across a red brick wall just outside the auditoriums. She had beautifully layered clothes, playing around with textures, prints and dyes.

Similarly, Ermi, a menswear label, stayed within its charcoal colour palette but put together many excellent pieces and styles that worked together so well, one could get dressed in the dark. Ogo played with denim, one of Moscow's favourite fabrics (the other two are wool and leather, and there's also linen). Popular label Za-Za played with form and volume and sent out clothes that were sculpted art works in themselves. I especially loved his use of petals, sometimes as lapels and at other times as headgear.

"Russian fashion is very diverse, and inspired by many subcultures, such as gothic, country, and even cyberpunk," says fashion translator Ksenia Shalygina. "There is also a small group that follows the influence of the aesthetic of the 2000s, coffee dates, expensive cars and clothes with logos." Tailoring and experimenting with surface textures is Russian fashion's favourite pastime. Red September is a gorgeous streetwear label, Imkmode reminds one of Thierry Mugler. Rogov is a popular stylist and influencer who has turned designer.

Slava Zaitsev, Ulyana Sergeenko (dressed Lady Gaga), Valentin Yudashkin, Alena Akhmadullina (dressed Malaika Arora), Rasario (dressed Priyanka Chopra, Ananya Panday, Jahnvi Kapoor as well as Lauren Sanchez) and David Koma are well-known global names.

Earlier this year, Demna Gvasalia from Georgia (formerly U.S.S.R.) was named chief designer of Gucci after reviving Balenciaga. Imagine a world where 10 such Demnas dominated luxury labels. It would make it harder for both the U.S. and Europe to ignore Russia's influence on global runways.

The writer is a seasoned fashion journalist who believes the world's economy can be ascertained by the length of hemlines.

ILLUSTRATION: ZAINAB TAMBAWALLA

A LITTLE LIFE

When two sisters split a village

And Phuphee wished she could pound some sense into them, almost like lotus stems for *nadir monjyi*

During the course of my life, I have watched Phuphee work through countless cases and offer each one a tailored solution. But there was one that remained unsolvable. The case involved two sisters who had a feud that had been ongoing for 25 years.

My earliest memory of them is from when I was 14 or 15. It had been a hot, humid day and I had been too lazy to follow Phuphee into her room when they had arrived. That was the only time I saw them together. After that, it was always one or the other at the house.

Over the years their feud intensified, at times causing everyone in the village to go into a tizzy and talk of nothing else and, at other times, they were as silent as the graveyard. The villagers would sometimes talk about how the feud had started, but no one ever really knew what it was that had set the two at each other's throats.

With time, it wasn't just the sisters who were fighting but their families. As each sister's family had expanded, so had the boundary of the feud. And once their immediate family members were in the fight club, the conflict slowly made its way into the village. The strange malady caused the people to express allegiance to one sister or the other even though it was never explicitly demanded by anyone.

The villagers sometimes found themselves getting into arguments and heated debates with their friends about the siblings. By the time the person would recover their senses, the damage had been done. Sometimes people speculated that the sisters were cursed and kept their distance, but then the enticing aroma of gossip would tickle their noses and draw them in and the cycle would start all over again.

One day in late September, my parents planned to drop me off at Phuphee's house for a couple of days. The air was infused with a chill, causing you to pull your *pashmina* a little tighter around your body. We were sitting in the *tonga* enroute to the house when I saw a small crowd gathered by the side of the road, with some people shouting and abusing each other. The *tongawaall*a told us not to worry as they were probably fighting about the sisters. Once we reached Phuphee's house, I ran inside to find her in the kitchen cleaning *nadru* (lotus stem). She got up and held me tight, and covered my face in kisses. She asked us to sit while she prepared *nadru yakhni* (lotus stem cooked in a yogurt and mint sauce) for lunch.

Later on, I was sitting with Phuphee as she pounded some *nadru* – the ones that were too hard to be cooked in the *yakhni* but would make excellent *nadir monjyi* (lotus stem cutlets). She would pound them into a coarse mixture, add egg and spices, and fry them in oil.

'Sometimes no matter how much you steam these they won't soften,' she said, looking up from the giant stone mortar, a little flushed. 'You have to pound them into submission.'

'Phuphee,' I asked, 'what was the reason for the two sisters fighting?'

She stopped what she was doing and asked one of my cousins to take over.

She came and sat down beside me, lit two cigarettes and after smoking for a couple of minutes, told me the cause. The elder sister, Latifa, had been married for a few years and had two children when the youngest, Moomina, got married. After a year of marriage, Moomina conceived but had a miscarriage. Obviously distraught from the trauma, she had gone to her maternal home to recover. It had been very difficult for her because there had been a lot of pressure on her to conceive.

When at her home, she opened her heart to her sister who had tried to console her. Latifa had said that it probably wasn't a bad thing given that Moomina had just started a new job as a teacher and having a baby would have put hurdles in her path. Upon hearing this, Moomina had become disturbed and asked her sister if she viewed her own children as hurdles to her career. One thing led to another and 20 years later, the feud continued. I was stunned.

'I always expected it to be something big that they had fought about,' I said.

'Big or small, that depends on whether you are Moomina or Latifa, of course. Latifa has refused to acknowledge or apologise for what she said, citing seniority as her reason,' Phuphee replied a little sharply.

I understood the change in her tone. It is possible it might have been a slip of the tongue for Latifa, but for Moomina it was an act of cruelty that would stay with her.

I asked Phuphee why she hadn't used her magic to help bring them together.

'I wish people were like *nadrus*,' she said. 'If they didn't become tender on cooking, you could still pound them into submission in the *nyaem* [mortar]. But they are not. There is no forgiveness without acceptance of your sin. Latifa might feel that what she said wasn't terrible, but the thing to remember about a situation like this is that the person who delivered the blow doesn't get to decide how painful or how deeply it cut the person who received it. When you hurt someone, you don't get to decide how much pain the other person should feel. You don't have the right or the power.'

I sat there thinking about her words and the two sisters. I wished there was some way to bring them together, but Phuphee was right. You couldn't pound sense into anyone, especially someone who held their sense of entitlement on a higher plane than everything else.

***Saba Mahjoor**, a Kashmiri living in England, spends her scant free time contemplating life's vagaries.*